

#162 WILL BRADY: USS *HELENA*

**Bart Fredo (BF):** Okay. I have to read this. It says, the following interview of Will Brady was conducted on December 3, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki at about one o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Brady lives in Sacramento, California. The interviewer is Bart Fredo and also with me is Dan Martinez of the National Park Service.

So, Mr. Brady, let me start off with a real hard one. Give me your name and what was your hometown back in 1941?

**Will Brady (WB):** My name is Will Brady. My hometown was Montgomery, Louisiana.

BF: What service were you in and what was your rank?

WB: I was in the Navy and I was a Seaman First Class, or just made top, I believe, then.

BF: What was your job?

WB: My job was controlling a fair amount of duties that the bosun mate gave me to take care of. Basically, I was a deck hand and in charge of the deck crew.

BF: What ship were you on?

WB: I was on the USS *HELENA*.

BF: That's a heavy cruiser?

WB: That's a light cruiser.

BF: Light cruiser.

WB: Sail fifty.

BF: When did you arrive in Hawaii?

WB: Oh, I don't remember the exact date, but it was in 1940, probably around November. I'm not sure.

BF: So you were here a while before the attack?

WB: Yeah.

BF: Let's turn our attention to the day of the attack. Early that morning, before the attack started, what were you doing?

WB: I had just [come] topside, because I was the duty P.O. to give out liberty cards . . .

BF: P.O. is petty officer.

WB: . . . petty officer, to give out the liberty cards. And I was on the starboard side, I believe it was, and I heard all this commotion going on just as I was getting ready to give out some cards.

BF: What kind of commotion?

WB: Well, such as explosions and engines.

BF: Did you see anything?

WB: Oh, at that particular moment, I had just heard 'em. When I looked up, I believe I was facing Ford Island, and I seen the explosions going on and the first I thought -- I was thinking was that our planes must have goofed up and they were unloading some bombs by mistake. And of course, within a couple seconds I realized -- seeing that red circle -- I realized it was the Japs that was bombing Pearl Harbor. And, well, I guess it took me a couple of seconds or maybe minutes before I realized that we was at war. And by then, GQ had sounded, which is general quarters. And people was started heading for their battle stations, and so did I.

BF: Where was your battle station?

WB: Mine was up in radar control, forward control, which handled the five-inch guns up forward.

BF: So you were above deck?

WB: Yeah, I was above deck. And by the time that the -- I guess, before I even got there -- I remember climbing up the ladders heading up there -- the ship was hit. And, well, from then on, things happened so fast it was hard to remember exactly what went on, you know, at the particular moment.

BF: What was it hit by, a torpedo or a bomb?

WB: It was hit by torpedoes and by then, the planes was in there and they started strafing us with machine gun and, you know, just a mess all over. Then you hear people hollering, they got hit and people was burnt and stuff like that.

BF: Did you see people get hit?

WB: Yeah, I seen a couple guys get killed there and of course, well, we had so much excitement going on, and I was trying to get to my station all at the same time. And I remember this one plane come in and strafing us, and I don't know whether he was trying to shoot me or what, but he was shaking his fist at me. I can still see him up there, shaking his fist. I don't know whether he's shaking at me or shaking at the whole ship or what. And about that time, somebody shot him down. I don't know if it was our ship or one of the other ships next to us. And I know how good it made me feel to see him go down that day.

BF: Was there a lot of confusion?

WB: Well, I don't know whether you call it confusion or where it was just so much going on that people were just kind of got mixed up what was what, because

all the ammunition was locked up and the guns, turrets, was locked and people had to take a lot of things on themselves because there was still a lot of people off on liberty that hadn't come back. And I guess it was a little bit of confusion.

BF: After you took that torpedo hit and the planes were strafing the ship, what happened next?

WB: We --- I went onto my station that way and my station is in radar control, which is, you know, and it swings around, picks up the control on the various objects it's going on. My job was down in the inside there, which I couldn't see outside, and they was setting the gun control, you know, destination and what not. And that was my job. So I didn't actually see too much that was going on until I (trails off).

BF: How long were you up on deck, outside so you could see, before you went inside?

WB: Oh, probably five or ten minutes, at the very most. I don't know if it was that long, maybe it was a lot less time.

BF: So you went inside and you're working in this enclosed area. What happens then?

WB: Well, you just hear a lot of stuff going on and of course, you were concentrating so much on just what your job was, well, you kind of blanked out everything else, trying to do the very best you can. And of course, I had a set of earphones on where I could talk to the people down in the guns and I could get a little information on what they was saying and hearing what was going on. But more than anything else, I was trying to make sure that I did my job the best that I could. And . . .

BF: Had the ship been hit subsequent to that first initial torpedo hit?

WB: Well, yes, I think the dive bombers had come in and was strafing us at that time, about the same time that the torpedoes hit. And I hadn't got to my station yet when the torpedoes was dropped.

BF: What kind of condition was the ship in, as time goes by?

WB: It's . . . was it the torpedo hit that you're talking about, what condition? The best I can recall, I believe we had two engine rooms knocked out and I know a lot of my friends got burnt from the explosion and the -- 'cause all the hatches was open and I guess the flame come up through there because I went down below -- I was up by then. And I know a lot of our guys that had already gotten burnt was taken to the hospital.

BF: Was there concern that the ship was going to go down?

WB: Well, to me, I didn't think it was, but some of the guys, I suppose, just coming up from topside, the ship had listed quite badly to the starboard, I believe. And so it was some people went off the ship, but then they seen it wasn't and somebody said, "Hey come on back," and everybody started coming back in the station and we started in action. So probably it was only two or three minutes at the very most, if it was that long, before we really started in.

BF: What was going through your mind this whole time?

WB: Well, it's kind of hard to say exactly what because you get so, I guess, excited, built up, 'til you was thinking mainly of how we'd all stop this. We know we was in war, and we wanted to find out -- at least I did -- I wanted to know what's the best way to put an end to this. And why was it happening, you know. I guess that's the things that was in mind, 'cause at the moment I wasn't scared, I guess I was too excited to be scared and I really didn't get scared until they quit shooting, and then I realized, what the heck, I coulda got killed here! So basically, like I say, I wasn't scared until that happened.

BF: How long were you on the ship that day?

--: Stop.

BF: Okay. I'll pick it up with that.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

VIDEOTAPE TWO

WB: I hadn't been on liberty for probably a couple of -- well, let's see, we was out at, on patrol, best I can recall, before then. Then we come in on a weekend, so it was probably was about three weeks before I had been on liberty before.

BF: Let's go back. Let me take you back a little bit. You were working on radar at that time, and that's relatively new technology. Tell us a little bit about the radar aboard the *HELENA*.

WB: Well, I don't know too much about the radar myself, because, like I say, I was trained to do a particular job. I do know that the radar was new and it would pick up objects, ships, or planes, or whatnot and then you had a screen would come back on, show you these little blips and whatnot. And well, that's about all I can tell you because I really didn't know anything about it, other than what it was doing.

BF: Did it seem to work okay that day?

WB: Yeah, it appeared to be working okay. Best I know, anyway. It wasn't the best or the latest, but what can I say for the attack. And I think it was sometime in January, we come back to the States and they refit us with new radar, new guns, and all of that.

BF: The *HELENA* was tied up at a dock and outboard of the ship was the *UGLALA*?

WB: Yes.

BF: Which was a . . . ?

WB: It was a repair ship.

BF: What happened to that ship?

WB: I know they raised her back up. I understood she went bottom up and they raised her up and pulled her back out.

BF: Away from you?

WB: Away from us.

BF: That torpedo that hit you, it must have gone underneath the *OGLALA*.

WB: It did. It went underneath and exploded in our engine rooms, two of our engine rooms.

BF: Were you ever concerned that your ship was going to go down?

WB: No, not really because I felt that she was a ship that was going to take more than a couple torpedoes to put her down.

BF: What happened the rest of the day, after the attack was over?

WB: We stayed at general quarters for, at least on call, all that day and all that night, and probably the next day. I remember I was up there for a long, long time, and just had enough time, maybe, to grab a sandwich or a cup of coffee. And of course, everybody was excited, talking about what went on and what they know about it. And of course, we was tied up to a dock. We had already heard there was some Japanese that was over there, loose, that might come aboard the ship and, you know, all this kind of stuff you hear. And of course, everybody was concerned about that. And we heard about the submarines coming in. So, you know, like most things, you get a lot of rumors and you really didn't know exactly what was going on.

BF: Did you see, during the course of the day, particularly during the attack, any acts of heroism? People doing things, extraordinary things?

WB: Well, I think everybody, more or less, did. One guy in particular, he was in the five-inch guns and 'cause we was (mumbles), there was no -- you had to have gloves, you know, to catch the hot shells that come out. He didn't have any cases, that why I was kind of thinking about it. As they kicked back, and he didn't have the gloves, I don't know what happened to 'em. I guess they misplaced it. He was catching them in his bare arms, these hot cases, and dumped 'em out. And that was one of the things that struck me more than anybody else, a guy would do that. Of course, his arm was all burnt from that.

BF: Remember his name?

WB: He was an Irishman, a red-headed Irishman. I think his name was Keaty, Keating?

BF: Keating?

WB: Keating, or some name like that.

BF: Did you ever see him again after that day?

WB: No, I don't know what happened to him. I've asked about him, but I just kind of lost track of him.

BF: What were the next few days like? Next few days, next few weeks.

WB: Well, until we went back to the States, we was pretty well-confined right aboard ship and there was always something to do, you know. We was on alert the whole time. I remember, I believe it was that night, after the attack, some American planes come in for replacements. I know we was firing on them before we found out they was American planes.

BF: As you know, martial law was declared soon after the attack. I take it because you spent most of your time aboard ship that you weren't really affected by martial law very much.

WB: No, it didn't affect us, or me, personally.

BF: Did you get an opportunity to go ashore at all?

WB: I did, probably right before we pulled out to come back to the States, I had a chance to go over and I remember seeing these dry docks were -- bombs had hit 'em and they bottom side up. And of course, I'd seen the ships out there, stuff like that. But I remember going ashore, I forget just why I went.

BF: The first time you had a chance to look over at Battleship Row, along Ford Island, and see the destruction, what was your reaction?

WB: I suppose that's one time I felt, oh boy, this is it, you know. I mean, how can we fight this war with nothing to fight left? It was real depressing. And knowing that a lot of people was killed, it really got next to a person that way.

BF: Did you lose a lot of friends that day?

WB: I lost several friends, yes. I wouldn't say a lot, but several. I known a lot of guys that did get killed or my close friends, probably about four that was lost.

BF: Some people who lived through that day still have bad feelings about Japan, the Japanese. How do you feel?

WB: I feel that in a way, well, you know, you don't forget. But I'm a forgiving person and I sort of forgive, but I haven't forgot. I don't know if that makes sense or not, but I kind of got mixed feelings, so to speak, on it. I still remember it and sometime I got to think about why. You know, if something comes up.

BF: Would you . . .

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

BF: Would you like to meet Japanese survivors of the war, or the attack?

WB: I have some friends that's Japanese and, of course, they happened to fight on our side too, couple of them that I know.

BF: But how about meeting Japanese nationals who participated in the war or in the attack? How would you feel about meeting or talking with them?

WB: Well, I don't know. I got mixed feelings on it whether I would enjoy it or not. I'm not sure. I wouldn't mind it, but I mean, if I'd want to or not, I'm not sure right now.

BF: When someone says the words, or you read the words, "Pearl Harbor," or "December 7," what do you think of? What comes to mind?

WB: Well, the first thing, I can still have a mental picture of what went on, what I'm seeing, and it always flashes right in front of me, I can still see those battleships and those dry dock ships that got blown up and see some people that are sitting on the dock, some aboard our ship. See all these holes in the sides of the ship, on the superstructure, from the strafing of the guns. And I did have some pretty bad dreams about it for a long time, but then they finally went away. But I still can see the whole picture of it when someone brings that to my mind.

BF: Some of the survivors don't really like talking about it. How do you feel?

WB: It took me quite a while before I was able to talk about it. I just wanted to block it out of my mind. And in fact, I did. It was years before I was even able to discuss it. In fact, my wife's been on me quite a few times, "Well, why don't you talk about it?" Well, I just don't feel like talking about it, I guess.

BF: What did you do for the rest of the war?

WB: Well, I stayed aboard the USS *HELENA* until she was sunk at Kula Gulf. Then I was picked up and we went back to Guadalcanal and my, I guess, I was there about thirty days before I caught a ship back to San Francisco. I'll never forget coming back on this empty tanker and it was real rough weather and every time a wave would hit up the side of the ship, it sounded like a torpedo coming through. And of course, all of us was quite jumpy and it was quite exciting coming back. And then when we got in San Francisco, they, I guess, they had the whole city of San Francisco out to greet us, I remember that. And then I was put on, I was sent up to Seattle. And I put a ship in commission; it was a minesweeper. And then I got sick and so the ship went on out to sea, and they assigned me to another one that I put in commission. And I stayed with her until after the war, and we went back down to the South Pacific and all the way to Japan.

BF: What kind of a ship was that?

WB: It's a minesweeper. The CLIMAX. I mean, it was a ship, CLIMAX [AM-161]. (Chuckles)

BF: Why do you say that?

WB: Well, I was the only guy aboard ship that ever had any experience, you know, out at sea, as far as a man of war ship. Everybody else was duty type. 'Cause, that's what they are, duty ships, mine sweeping. So they had no conception of really what it was all about. And I kind of didn't like that, I wanted to get back in the thick of the battle, but they wouldn't let me. They wanted to keep me on that.

BF: Just -- sound like Mr. Roberts.

WB: I suppose that's about the way it was. I really hated that and I was on that from July '43 to, I got out in 1946, in February.

BF: You played a role, a part, in a very important event in history, the attack on Pearl Harbor. Has that fact affected your life in any way?

WB: Well, it made me think more what we should do to preserve the American way of life. That's one reason I belong to the Pearl Harbor Survivors, the PSHA. And I ( phone rings) do try to, you know, stay up with that, because I feel we should get out and let -- especially these younger people -- know what went on.

Daniel Martinez: I have a question.

BF: Sure. Someone unplug the phone?

DM: Yeah. The question would revolve around he mentioned that when they pulled out of Battleship Row, this morning, and several of the survivors had, when the ships pulled out, their men stood, stood on the deck and looked at the *ARIZONA*. That's the only time he saw a lot of the men break down and cry.

BF: Okay.

DM: (Trails off.)

BF: Okay, let me ask that. Are we still rolling? Okay.

At some point that day, did you and some of your shipmates have an opportunity to look over at Battleship Row and see what happened, specifically to the *ARIZONA*? Was there any reaction when that happened?

WB: I don't remember offhand why I looked at it specifically or not. I did see the whole Battleship Row and it did make you really, you know, feel bad. 'Cause, you know, a lot of people was, what they went through and we heard all these stories what happened. And yes, it was people with tears in their eyes. I don't recall whether I did or not -- I probably did, with the rest. All I know is some sobering minutes there that everybody was real quiet then. They didn't have much to say.

BF: Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share with us, something you can tell us?

WB: No. The only thing I can say, I got scared at that time, I was scared until it was all over with. About the only thing I got to say.

END OF INTERVIEW